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ABSTRACT

In view of the statistics on the high degree of mobility in the student population across the United States, it is surprising that there is so little definitive research available on the effects of mobility on the achievement and adjustment of mobile students and so few suggestions to schools about how best to provide educational services to an increasingly transient student population. Mobility studies which have been undertaken indicate that correlations, although not necessarily cause-and-effect relationships, between mobility and poor achievement in language, reading, and mathematics have been found. For successful adaptation to a new school it has been claimed that the child must find an acceptable place among new peers, be able to meet the academic and behavior standards, and be accepted by the teacher. Effective school research has indicated that small focused programs with staff commitment can assist at-risk students. It has been recommended that there be individualized attention for leaving and newly entering students, and that parent handbooks and institutionalized practices be designed to assist children in making adjustments. School counselors can arrange opportunities for students to discuss adjustment problems. Teachers can be prepared to teach children who are culturally different. Services for immigrating groups and the mobile handicapped can be provided. (ABL)

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WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THE HIGHLY MOBILE STUDENT?

A Research Brief

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WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THE HIGHLY MOBILE STUDENT?

A RESEARCH BRIEF

Does high mobility equal high risk? A review of the research in ERIC and in the journal literature indicates that:

Mobility itself cannot be pinpointed as a cause of poor achievement or adjustment, but is a complicating factor for a child who has other at-risk characteristics.

Although schools cannot correct for socio-economic factors or for a wide variety of family decisions and other conditions which cause school children to move, schools can indeed control many aspects of mobile children's school experience, including achievement and adjustment for children who are adversely affected by frequent moving.

Successful school practices for teaching the at-risk mobile child include applying effective schools' research, and providing small focused programs with accurate assessment and frequent monitoring.

Suggested school practices for assisting all mobile children to adjust more easily to a new school and to perform up to their potential include: Making schools a welcoming place for newcomers, teaching adjustment and coping skills to all children as part of the regular curriculum, providing counseling groups for adolescents, and providing training for teachers to assist them in working with students of a culture other than their own.

INTRODUCTION

In just the five years between 1975 and 1980, 45% of the American population changed its place of residence at least once, according to the U.S. Bureau of Census. This trend continues today. In Washington State, 340,684 people moved out, and 709,014 moved in for a net increase in the same time period of 368,330. The 1990 population in our state is expected to show a net increase of 21% over the 1980 figure. Although school enrollment in Washington fell 9.7% between 1970 and 1980, it surged forward again, by 7,686 between the 1984-1985 and 1985-1986 school years alone, with the entire net increase at the elementary level. But these overall increases don't mean just that our school population is growing. As the above in- and out-migration figures for the state show us, many children are moving both in and out of our classrooms more and more frequently. With the pending U.S. Navy installation at Everett, many school staffs and community members wonder if the ESD 189 region will experience an even greater mobile school population than elsewhere in the state.

THE PROBLEM WITH MOBILITY RESEARCH

In view of the statistics on mobility in the student population across the United States, it is surprising that there is so little definitive research available on the effects of mobility on the achievement and adjustment of mobile students and so little suggestion to schools about how best to provide educational services (like the very effective Migrant Student Record Transfer System) to an increasingly transient student population. In fact, some of the same obstacles are faced by both migrant and non-migrant-but-mobile students: School conditions, like inadequate assessment; teacher attitudes toward mid-year transfers; inter-state and local variations in school policies and curricular requirements; and societal attitudes, such as the belief that success is the individual's responsibilty (and therefore any failure is also).

The National Education Association declared in a 1980 position paper that mobility itself is not the problem. "The problem is that the system lacks readiness and capability to deal with... mobility." (The Office of Migrant Education and the Migrant Student Record Transfer System were the goals of this particular thrust.) All schools today face the need to develop procedures for integrating transient children into the school population in addition to those programs specifically targeted to migrant children.

But despite the need, as Alan Bayer of Florida State University observed in 1982, "relatively little, large-scale sociological, demographic and educational research bears directly on the question of school transfer...relatively little (exists) which addresses adjustment as a function of the school transfer experience. Research on mobility, he went on, tends to focus on the number of schools a student has attended -- information easy to obtain but left largely unanalyzed as to what risk factors are involved -- and results are clouded by failure to distinguish between, for instance, "geographic" or longer moves and moves within a district or community, such as school-system-initiated transfers for desegregation or enrollment distribution purposes.

A study conducted in Brooklyn, New York in 1982 for the National Institute of Education found that "the relationship between mobility and educational achievement is a complex problem, inadequately researched and only partially understood...no one can say to what extent lower pupil performance results from mobility. The direct effect of mobility is likely to be small and be itself affected by the social context and reasons for mobility." The factors intertwined with mobility to cause lower achievement in some, but not all, children were found in Brooklyn to include socio-economic status and "additional variables which relate to family structure," as well as the many varied and individual reasons behind moving. Dr. Carl Sewell, the principal investigator of this study, decried researchers' tendency to treat mobility as a group characteristic when in fact, he says, it is an individual one.

WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED

What, then, do mobility studies say, which respective researchers feel is definitive? Correlations (though not necessarily cause and effect relationships) between mobility and poor achievement in language, reading and mathematics have been found in several studies at the elementary level. In a 1983 Canadian study, "increasing mobility" was correlated with "progressively decreasing performance on both ability and achievement tests" but the researchers noted that "it is not clear from these data whether mobility is a cause or merely a correlate of poor achievement." A 1981 report by Dennis A. DeNomme and Raeford M. Wells of Vail Elementary District in Arizona indicated that highly transient children may display symptoms similar to those of specific learning disabilities. Studies in the 1960's and 1970's in which children themselves were questioned and their behavior observed, concluded that moving to a new school is seen as a major problem by children who move, especially in the elementary grades. One researcher even declared that for young children, the experience of moving "parallels the experience of death and grief." Others reported that feelings of fear, insecurity and loss are often translated into sadness, anger, anxiety, withdrawal or aggressiveness in a new school. When moving is a corollary to separation and/or divorce in the child's family, these feelings may be intensified, according to others. Susan Holland-Jacobson and others, writing in the September 1984 School Counselor, estimate that for a child's successful adaptation to a new school, "three basic tasks must be resolved:

1. The child must find an acceptable place among his or her new peers.

2. The child must be able to meet the academic and behavioral standards for his or her grade level in the new school.

3. The child must be accepted by the teacher an as appropriate member of the assigned class."

Studies of teacher attitudes toward student mobility in the 1960's and 1970's indicate that teachers tend to believe that transient students will perform at a lower level than non-transients and will compare unfavorably in attendance, ability and attitude. No more recent studies were found, but the effective schools research on high expectations and increased student achievement should apply here, and tell us that if teachers don't expect as good performance from mobile students, the result may indeed be poor performance. The Canadian study cited above noted that teacher prediction of low student achievement among highly mobile students was correct a significant percentage of the time, but again it was not known if this was a self-fulfilling prophecy, a result of good teacher judgement or due to other factors.

Despite a common concern about the effect of mobility on children of the military (a concern apparently shared by military families and local communities alike), available studies, again from the 1970's, show no significant difference in military children's achievement from that of their non-military peers in various curricular areas.

Finally, mobile handicapped children, immigrant children and both Puerto Rican and American Indian children have been identified as suffering specific difficulties in disruption/interruption of their education, due to such problems as inadequate child find, state and local variations in eligibility and residence requirements for obtaining special services, and inconsistencies in availability of the services themselves.

WHAT SHOULD SCHOOLS DO?

In considering those cases in which high mobility appears to be a contributing factor in poor performance, a 1986 report of the Goal Based Education Program, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, may be relevant. This report reviews the question of whether effective schools research can profitably be applied to the improvement of education for at-risk students, and concludes that indeed it can, with additional emphasis on commitment of staff and small, focused programs for at-risk kids. The report cites the following "demographic, socio-economic and institutional characteristics...correlated with a high likelihood of dropping out" of school, i.e., characterisitics correlated with being at-risk:

"Living in high-growth areas

Living in unstable school districts

Being a member of a low-income family

Having low academic skills (though not necessarily low intelligence)

Having parents who are not high school graduates

Speaking English as a second language

Being single-parent children

Having negative self-perceptions; being bored or alienated; having low self-esteem

Choosing alternatives: males tend to seek paid work, while females may drop out to have children and to get married"

At least the first two of these characteristics are related to mobility, and in many individual cases the others may also be.

Regarding what schools can and cannot do about these at-risk conditions, the author of the NWREL report, Greg Druian, concludes, "It is probably important to distinguish between social characteristics of at-risk youth and the conditions in schools which inhibit or fail to bring about learning. It is becoming increasingly clear that at-risk youth are those who attend certain types of schools -- specifically schools with little support, which promote low expectations and which have little or no curriculum focus." Strong leadership and "fair -- though sometimes tough -- programs of discipline", in addition to commitment of instructional staff and small, focused programs, are key factors in schools where students are not at-risk, in this view. Individual programs serving at-risk youth, says Druian, may best be pull-out programs, "which may be the only way in which certain youth in certain schools can be reached at all." Cooperative learning, in which "at risk pupils interact with a variety of other pupils" is also suggested. And Druian cites another researcher who "calls attention to peer teaching and cooperative learning as 'two approaches that seem to work particularly well for disadvantaged students.'"

Other research on class size and on retention/promotion also supports the small, focused program approach with low performing or failing students, with special emphasis on accurate diagnosis of difficulties, application of resources, and careful monitoring of progress.

The Brooklyn study concluded with recommendations, most of which are admittedly specific to its own schools. One recommendation that seems to have broader application, however, is the recommendation that teachers be provided with records of new students as soon as at all possible, so that teachers will not form expectations and opinions about new students before knowing the facts about them. Other reports have also stressed the need for speedy transfer of mobile student records.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS FOR MOBILE STUDENTS

Research in the 1960's and early 1970's established the contribution of a child's self-respect and self-understanding to his or her easy adjustment to a new school. Helping a child to recognize and develop alternative responses to his or her life problems (including moving to a new area and school) was proposed at that time as a method for improving self-esteem and building the child's sense of his or her own efficacy in dealing with such challenges.

At the same time, suggestions for assisting the child through the transition process were proposed, based on the observations of parents and teachers and on children's own expressions about the difficulties of entering a new school. It was suggested, for instance, that the teacher of the child who is leaving should prepare for the child's parents not only the child's records, but also a review of the child's likely strengths and weaknesses at

the new school. It was also suggested that the teacher at the receiving school watch for distress signals such as the child's being overly talkative, overly studious, agressive, withdrawn, etc., while noting the new child's sources of pride, in order to provide the new child with opportunities to contribute to the new group and become an attractive member of it (play an instrument, contribute a true story, etc.).

Today, this individualized attention may not be practical, especially when the circumstances of the move may not be known much in advance and the exact destination school may not be established. These suggestions might more profitably be incorporated into 1) a parent education program or handbook and 2) institutionalized practices designed to provide children with skills to assist themselves and others in making adjustments to life changes and make all schools welcoming places which operate on the assumption that "oldcomers" and "newcomers" will always be present in considerable numbers. To quote Helen Cowan Wood in When Children Move from School to School, "belonging comes first, before children can turn their attention to the school program." If these steps were to be taken, a research-based approach might look something like this:

1. A parent education program or handbook might include:

    a. The types of information the new teacher might like to have about the incoming child -- records, strengths and weaknesses, special skills or characteristics/history/experiences which are a source of pride to the child.

    b. Questions to ask about the new school/class procedures and customs, where various parts of the school are located, etc.

    c. Common effects of moving on the behavior of children of varying ages.

    d. Ways to assist children with the transition, such as taking a child's questions seriously; open discussion of feelings and apprehensions; providing books from reading lists about children's experiences in moving; making time for family celebrations of the child's accomplishments; and other activities to increase a child's self-understanding and self-respect, thus giving him or her the tools for meeting new situations with confidence.

    e. Ways to assist the child in keeping old friends and making new ones, such as sending change-of-address cards to old friends and encouraging the child to bring new friends home at the new location.

2. School practices for assisting those who will be leaving and those who are newcomers might include:

   a. To assist children who are leaving:

      1. A report to parents on the child's areas of strength and weakness and the procedure for forwarding the child's records to the new school when known.

      2. A packet of materials of the child's best work, lists of materials used in the old class, etc. to go with each child who is leaving.

      3. Short in-class activities in which plans are made to keep in touch with those who are leaving.

   b. To assist newcomers:

      1. A reception committee or tour guides in each elementary classroom, whose job it is to escort newcomers on explanatory tours of the building and acquaint them with school customs. (Many schools in ESD 189 use this technique with new students.)

      2. The use of "paired helpers" or volunteer "sponsors" in the classroom to assist new children in becoming part of the group.

      3. Regular inservice for teachers on facilitating adaptation of new students.

      4. Teacher alertness to signs of distress (over-shyness, aggressiveness, withdrawal, etc.) and to signs of success (self-confidence, increased participation) in new students. (This practice too is in common use in ESD 189.)

      5. New-parent conferences or new-parent group activities in which teachers, counselors where possible, and new parents develop a plan for helping their children to recognize and work through identified problems the children are having.

      6. Tutoring "catch-up" sessions at the beginning of the year as necessary. Well-planned peer tutoring would be a useful program here.

c. To assist all mobile and potentially mobile children:

1. In-class activity, as part of the regular curriculum, in which all students are guided in a discussion of roles and responsibilities of members of a group, including welcoming newcomers and assisting each other to make contributions to group activities. This discussion may be followed by overt teaching to children the skills of belonging to a group.

2. De-emphasizing the competition and grading practices which favor the long-time school population and cause newcomers to give up easily.

One can easily see the applications of cooperative learning and metacognitive skills teaching here.

These recommendations were formed in the 1960's and 1970's. By 1981, however, the NEA reviewed the impact of an increasingly mobile school population and Roy Fuentes warned that "it is unreasonable to assume that parents with school-age children adhere to...(the suggested) procedure (for getting and delivering student information) when they move." "Fortunately," Fuentes continued, "because of migrant education, American education is not without experience in mobility...particularly the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (which) is one of the cornerstones in building a...capability for serving migrant, mobile and transfer students... We must talk about using modern technology to equip traditional school buildings with electronic computer facilities necessary for handling the problems inherent in mobility."

The school counselor's role is seen as key by Susan Holland-Jacobsen and others, in arranging opportunities for students changing schools to discuss adjustment problems and to learn coping strategies. Some problems for discussion with adolescent students are outlined in a discussion guide for a now ten-year-old Canadian video program, "Moving On": The problem of being alone, of being different; changes in the environment causing problems in how to dress or how to speak the "language" of the new peer group; the fact that as students may adjust faster than parents to the new location and its culture, conflict between generations may result; racial discrimination either as name-calling or as avoidance; differences in academic and teacher standards from the previous school.

When a segment of the mobile population consists of those from backgrounds other than the teachers' norm, teachers need to be prepared to teach children who are culturally different. And services for immigrating groups and the mobile handicapped must be located and made available.

CONCLUSION

Although mobility itself does not seem to put children at risk -- even when children move often, as in the military family -- high mobility seems to affect adversely those children who may be at-risk in school for other reasons. Suggestions for addressing the needs of mobile children at risk include adopting effective school practices; providing small, focused programs with committed staff; careful diagnosis of difficulties and frequent monitoring; cooperative learning and peer teaching programs; parent education materials; school practices that welcome newcomers and teach adjustment skills as a regular part of the curriculum; counseling groups for mobile adolescents; special training for teachers, to enable them to teach effectively those students who are culturally different from themselves; and locating and providing special services for mobile handicapped and immigrating groups.

- J. Newman
ESD 189

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